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Iraq war veterans relate experiences to simulation pros

Companies create realistic combat-training programs based on what they're learning from the front lines.

Richard Burnett | Sentinel Staff Writer

Posted December 6, 2006

Army Capt. Chris Byrne was shaken violently by the blast, which engulfed a large truck in his convoy on the road to Tikrit. Like others in his unit, Byrne figured his vehicle was next.

But once the initial shock passed, Byrne found himself barking orders, securing the scene's perimeter and rushing to help rescue two crew members who were horribly burned.

The 26-year-old unit leader tried to call medical air support, but the radios were dead. His only chance to save the victims was to take them back to base himself -- down the road along which the convoy had just been ambushed.

Byrne received the Bronze Star for heroism for his actions that day in Iraq. The injured soldiers survived the attack by Iraqi insurgents who had detonated the "improvised explosive device," or IED.

Byrne is sharing his story this week at the U.S. military's top high-tech training industry show, the Interservice/Industry Training, Simulation & Education Conference. He is among a group of Iraq war veterans in Orlando to talk about the value of war-game training -- what works and what doesn't work -- in preparing them for combat.

"Nothing can really replicate those first few seconds when the explosion goes off and everything's a mess," he said. "But what you can do is prepare for the worst. You can understand how you're going to handle a number of situations. And all the simulators and training definitely prepared us."

Companies that develop training simulations for the military are learning more from front-line soldiers, learning it sooner and making use of what they learn more quickly in the Iraq war than in any other conflict in U.S. history, defense officials say.

PHOTOS



Capt. Chris Byrne: Won a Bronze Star for his heroic actions in Iraq. He emphasizes the need for war-game training to prepare soldiers for combat.

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For example, as convoys came under an increasing number of attacks from IEDs after the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, contractors quickly incorporated what they were hearing from soldiers to produce a relevant, up-to-date convoy trainer.

"The Army and its contractors turned out the convoy-trainer system in record time," said Heather Kelly, a spokeswoman for the Army's simulation-and-training agency in Orlando -- one of the military's largest such contracting organizations. "And it has played a critical role in preparing the warfighter against the threat of IEDs."

Lockheed Martin Corp.'s Orlando simulation-training unit led the team that developed the convoy simulator. It is part of the company's exhibit at this week's trade show, which ends Thursday at the Orange County Convention Center.

Byrne trained on the system, which sends soldiers through realistic but computer-generated attack scenarios that require real-time decisions on the battlefield. When his convoy was hit on the road to Tikrit, that training helped him keep his wits and act decisively, once the initial shock passed, he said.

But with the enemy in Iraq constantly changing tactics, it is a major challenge for training-equipment developers to keep up with the reality of the war zone, he said.

"It's a very deadly chess game with the insurgents," Byrne said. "When I first arrived in Iraq, we learned how to deal with the remotely triggered IED, but the insurgents soon found that out and started using buried explosives triggered by a pressure plate."

The simulation-training trade show expects to attract close to 20,000 people and 500 exhibitors. For much of the past two decades, it has been held in Orlando, which has one of the world's largest clusters of training-technology companies and agencies. The cluster, much of which is located in Central Florida Research Park, comprises more than 100 companies and 17,000 workers, economic-development officials estimate.

From the combat level to the command level, the U.S. military continues to adopt training simulations for a growing number of war-game objectives, military leaders said Tuesday. The emphasis in recent years has been on conducting "virtual" training exercises that can involve all branches of the service linked by computer networks, they said.

Such "joint forces" exercises have been so promising and cost-efficient that the U.S. eventually wants to involve the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in them, said Vice Admiral Mark P. Fitzgerald, commander of the U.S. Navy's 2nd Fleet and a keynote speaker at this week's conference.

There are still technology differences that must be bridged, however, before an effective global training exercise could be conducted, he said.

"At the strategic level, that's the next big place where simulation will come into play," Fitzgerald predicted. "But we need to get our technical models right, and make sure we have developed systems together from the ground up so they are all compatible."

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